

ROBERT TREAT BIOGRAPHY AND CURATOR'S STATEMENT

In recent years, Robert Treat's paintings and expertise in the medium of encaustic have garnered critical acclaim and a dedicated art world following. However, like many artists of his caliber, Treat's talents are considerable and diverse, extending far beyond the realm of his painting and printmaking studio. They range from architectural design to being an award-winning animator and animation director. He is also a brilliant black and white photographer who briefly studied under Ansel Adams.

Born in 1949 in Toledo, Ohio, Treat's interest in art was evident by the first grade. His formal art education began at age ten when his parents sent him to a summer art program sponsored by the Dayton Art Institute. During his high school years, Treat's talent and an art scholarship enabled him to concurrently attend the Columbus College of Art and Design. After graduating high school, having won several design competitions and aided by an architectural scholarship, Treat entered Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, majoring in architecture. However, it wasn't long before Treat, who has never been comfortable with regimentation, realized that he "didn't want to sit behind a drafting table." Consequently, he switched from architecture to fine art. In 1972 he earned a BFA in printmaking, specializing in intaglio printing and serigraphy.

Although Treat had no experience with filmmaking or animation, a job offer as an animator with a film company was an irresistible challenge. After two years of working on television commercials and industrial films, Treat left his job and began postgraduate studies in art at the University of Cincinnati. A year later, another job opportunity as an art and animation director with a different film company enticed him to abandon his studies. In 1979, Treat moved to Los Angeles, the center of the industry, to hone his animation skills. There he built a distinguished career in the field, working for companies like Disney, Nickelodeon, Hanna Barbera, and Marvel, and with luminaries like Chuck Jones. His accomplishments include winning three Emmy Awards for animation direction. Treat relocated to San Diego in 1986 to work on an animation project. The livability of the city, compared to Los Angeles, and the willingness of studio executives to let him work from his Normal Heights home, convinced him to settle here permanently.

Treat's interest in fine art never waned while he was employed in the animation field. During this period, Treat made drawings and paintings, and like many artists in the 1980s, he became interested in working with handmade paper. Always driven to experimentation, he has used materials as unorthodox as copper oxide paint (sprayed with dilute hydrochloric acid to change its color) on paper. Some of these incorporated wax coatings and patinas. In the early 1990s, Treat began painting using the medium of encaustic (molten wax colored with oil soluble pigments.*) He was captivated, in particular, by the unique (and sensuous) physical and visual properties of the medium. For example, the unique characteristics of encaustic enable artists to achieve translucent and luminous effects not possible in any other painting medium, and to build unusually thick impastos and textures that dry in seconds. (The same effect using oil paints could take months or years to dry.) True to Treat's love of unusual materials, most of his encaustic paintings incorporate opaque passages of asphalt that provide an intriguing contrast to the wax.

To the artist, the immediate gratification he receives when he applies the wax and the feel of the wax to the touch are part of its allure. Even the sweet, pungent smell of the wax and the solvents used to dissolve it, are intoxicating to him. Another aspect of encaustic that appeals to Treat is its unpredictability. “Encaustic has its own mind,” says the artist. “It does what it wants to do.”

Molten wax hardens seconds after it is applied, but the process of completing an entire painting, especially given the large scale of many of Treat’s works, can take weeks. Treat uses a variety of techniques to manipulate the wax, including painting, drawing, scraping, incising, remelting, dripping, and pouring. Encaustic is one of the most durable and stable painting media ever developed, and the mummy portraits that have survived intact from the first and second centuries AD, attest to their resistance to moisture, yellowing, fungus, and cracking. (For more information on encaustic, a comprehensive article can be found in volume ten of *The Dictionary of Art* (1996, edited by Jane Turner. Treat will also discuss materials and techniques during his artist’s talk on September 22.)

Much of Treat’s inspiration, including his earth-toned palette, is derived from nature and natural forms. His imagery is primal, yet elegant; nuanced; somewhat spare; and often eccentric. Treat strives for ambiguity in terms of representation and symbolism, and he works intuitively, that is, with no preconceived compositional plan or images. Treat attributes this method of creating, in part, to a conscious rejection of what he describes as “the tight and controlled line work and obvious narrative characteristics” of the animated films that played a major role in his life. He confesses having attempted to work within the structure of a grid, but abandoned the endeavor because he felt artistically constrained. This is somewhat curious because Treat is a brilliant space planner, as is manifested in the house in which he lives (he transformed a small, ordinary house overlooking a canyon into an architectural showplace), complete with an ambitious model railroad (another discipline in which he has a national reputation) in the backyard. Another clue to the classic foundations of Treat’s art is that he interested in the human figure and attends regular life drawing sessions. All of this is moderated by an undercurrent of playfulness, evinced in certain shapes and passages, and, of course, the titles of the works (*Trilling Willie*, *Walking Blacks* [*Bad Duck*], etc.) which can be cryptic as well as humorous.

Some striking relationships and similarities can be found between Treat’s paintings and those of other artists, both ancient and contemporary. Major influences on Treat include Willem deKooning, Robert Motherwell, and Richard Diebenkorn, and the affinities between Treat’s paintings and those of contemporary heavy-hitters like Caio Fonseca can’t be denied. Treat’s personal collections of art and objects are even more revealing. Children’s art, and folk and tribal art, are artfully placed in every room of his house and studio, interestingly juxtaposed with organic-looking contemporary ceramics. His library includes books on cave paintings, such as those found in Lascaux, France, and Altamira, Spain. (He’s particularly enamored with the petroglyphs of the Coso Indians at China Lake, California.)

Augmenting the paintings in this exhibition are seven ink, gouache, and wax drawings created especially for this exhibition, plus a handsome and powerful series of monotype prints that have never before been exhibited. By isolating a single graphic element, the prints, in particular, offer viewers a closer look at the importance of the gesture in Treat’s art and his gifts

as a printmaker. Treat's paintings, prints, and drawings offer a welcome respite from the coldness of much of today's contemporary art.

Treat will give an artist's talk on Saturday, September 22, at 1 p.m. and an in-depth television interview with Treat, taped in mid-September, will begin airing in October on CityTV 24 as part of the ongoing artist interview series "Profiles," hosted by the library curator. All Visual Arts Program events are free and open to everyone.

*A note on the medium: Encaustic, a term applied to the medium, technique, or process of painting with molten wax (mostly beeswax) colored with pigments, was first used by ancient Greek and Roman artists in 5 B.C. The earliest surviving examples are portraits from the 2nd century A.D. on small wooden panels that were attached to mummy cases. In Western art, working in encaustic media has enjoyed sporadic and minor revivals over the centuries, but was largely superseded by tempera, oil, and acrylic media. In modern and contemporary art, artists such as Robert Delaunay, Diego Rivera, Antoine Pevsner, and Jasper Johns revived interest in encaustic, and, although it is regarded as one of the most durable media invented, it is still not commonly used.

Mark-Elliott Lugo, Library Curator
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